

How to Create a Classroom Literature Circle

by [Alexandra R. Moses](#)

This how-to article accompanies the feature "[Classroom Literature Circles Expand Thought](#)."

Teachers who want to try out literature circles need to know one thing -- no two circles look the same.

"It's an approach that's so different in every classroom," says Katherine L. Schlick Noe, an education professor at Seattle University who has written extensively about literature circles. "So many people use them in different ways."

The keys to success are simplicity and adaptability. And although it might seem that the most logical subjects in which to use them are those heavy in reading, such as language arts, history, and English, they can be used in other subjects. A high school science teacher in North Carolina, for example, uses literature circles to help her students understand complex scientific terms.

Noe advises teachers to give students one thing to think about and put the emphasis on the conversation, starting with a five-minute discussion. Teachers can set up the circles so that each group meets one at a time, with the teacher sitting in, or so that all groups meet at once, and the teacher circulates among them.

A common mistake is for teachers to give students too much to do, such as a long list of questions or complicated projects. "Students go into the tasks rather than delving deeply into the books, Noe explains. She suggests students use Post-it notes to mark what they want to discuss, or write down a quote or a thought as they're reading to prepare them for the circle discussion.

Here are a few tips:

- **Offer students a choice.** Sixth-grade teacher Alisa Gladstone says letting her students pick a book, a theme, and a partner gives even the most reluctant reader a vested interest in the material.
- **Don't dominate the discussion.** Part of the fun is seeing where the students go in the circle. Teachers should observe and give feedback, and gently guide things back on track when necessary, but they should not micromanage.
- **Encourage reflection.** After the students finish their circle, have them write about what they thought of the discussion. For younger students, it can be a few sentences. For older students, it can be a stream-of-consciousness-style journal entry.
- **Assign a project.** Many teachers have their students do projects at the end of the book discussion. This is an especially good way for the nonverbal students to express themselves, Noe says. Some of Gladstone's students did maps, acrostic poems, and a quilt. A first-grade teacher Jennifer McFarland's students have done puppet shows, dioramas, and a story quilt.
- **Be aware of common pitfalls.** Students who read too far ahead and give away the ending, students who are unprepared to discuss, or discussions that go too far off track can derail a literature circle. McFarland talks to parents at the beginning of the school year, making sure their children don't read beyond the assignment.

Get Around to Circles

To get more information on literature circles and additional tips on getting started, check out these Web resources:

- The [Literature Circles Resource Center](#) provides examples from teachers of different methods, resources for doing them, and suggestions for how to choose books and projects.
- This [video](#) from Carol Morgan School, in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, shows a literature circle in action.
- Teacher Jennifer McFarland's [classroom Web page](#) includes examples of literature-circle projects.
- [LiteratureCircles.com](#) includes reviews of books that work well in literature circles.

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